The Problem of Religion
John 2:12-22
February 9, 1969

Bethany Presbyterian Church
John M. Buchanan, Minister

Whether we like it or not, the fact remains that a great deal of the content of the New Testament has to do with conflict. Because we don't like it - conflict in general, and conflict in the church specifically - we condition ourselves to ignore it, cover it up, hide it; furiously trying to convince ourselves that all things religious must be serene and peaceful. We do so, of course, only at the risk of fundamentally altering the New Testament - a project we are willing to undertake for the grand cause of avoiding conflict.

Whether we like it or not, the conflict that runs through the Gospel narrative, is largely between Jesus and religion; that is, institutional religion in the form of the established power structure of first century Judaism. What is worse, Jesus, himself precipitated the conflict. The Pharisees and Sadducees didn't go to him looking for trouble. Quite the reverse is true. He brought it to them: he was the aggressor: he threw down the kind of arrogant ultimatum they could not ignore.

The incident itself is very familiar. In Matthew, Mark and Luke it occurs during the last week of his life, just prior to his arrest and crucifixion. In John - the account read this morning - the incident is at the beginning of his public ministry. Jesus went to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, and when he arrived at the Temple he discovered a very bizarre scene. The outer court was filled with the clamour of the market place. Money changers competed with hawkers of sacrificial birds. Bulls, lambs, pigeons were for sale. His response was immediate. Fashioning a whip from some cords, he forcefully, violently ejected the entrepeneurs from their place of business, overturning their tables in the process. We can only imagine the chaos; animals running loose, salesmen scurrying after their stock and rolling coins; we can only imagine the initial surprise which must immediately have become resentment and their hatred.

That is the incident I would like to have us think about this morning. And while the rough details are still in your mind, and before we look at it more closely, I would direct your attention back to the present tense - our situation: the problem of religion today.

One part of the problem is that we are nearing the saturation point. In his excellent study, "The New Shape of American Religion", Martin Marty documents the fantastic rise in religious interest in this nation since World War II. The evidence is all about us. We can't even get the Cotton Bowl game underway without a public tip of the hat in the direction of heaven. People who would never think of reading the Bible to their children, or setting a foot inside the Church, raise their voices in pious protest because the Supreme Court has said that the states can't sponsor Bible reading and prayer as part of public education.

There is a continuing interest in religion in our culture. It seems that about half of thepersonalities on the Joe Pyne Show are in some way related to religion. As a topic of discussion, religion is a tried and true method of captivating an audience.

Religion continues to be very acceptable. The plaque in the Narthex symbolizing the Barmen Confession is testimony to the fact that in the not-too-distant-past, Chritian faith was not at all acceptable to the political power structure in one culture, at least. But in America, besides being a father and a veteran, a prospective politician can do no better for himself than salt his oratory with Biblical quotes.

Religion contunues to be interesting, socially acceptable and very popular. For many people, it is "the thing to do." Church membership is helpful economically and professionally. The statistical climb has levelled off a bit, but still, far more people indicate some relationship to the Church, or at least some recognition of the existence of a supreme being, than in any other nation in the world. Religion is interesting, acceptable and popular.

The trouble is that "interest in" religion is not at all the same thing as Christian Faith. "Interest" is a rather limp word to use in reference to something so ultimate as religion. One gets the imporession that the Temple money changers would have been very interested in religion. But it was the late C. S. Lewis who put it best when he wrote: "....religious people--that is, people when they are being religious--are not interested in religion. Men who have gods worship those gods; it is the spectators who describe this as interest in religion.... The moment a man seriously accepts a deity his 'interest' in religion is at an end. He's got something else to think about." (Punch, July 9, 1965--used by Marty). In other words, it's one thing to be intellectually curious about religion; it's another thing entirely to be religiously committed to Jesus Christ.

Religion is acceptable, and the trouble with this one is that broad acceptability is purchased at the price of particularity. To be broadly accepted religion cannot afford to get particular about anything.

Thus, when we talk about the religiosity of the American people, we must use the vaguest, most general terms available. Everyone believes in God--but the minute you try to say something specific about that God, you're in trouble. And so Religion chooses not to. Platitudes serve for theology; piety serves in place of devotion. Jesus Christ becomes a friend instead of a Lord, and God Almighty becomes a benevolent father who really isn't too concerned with how life is lived.

Religion is popular and that popularity depends directly on no one becoming offended. What that means is that the Church has to somehow conform to the individual's political, social and economic creed--and if it doesn't; if it challenges one of these; if it directly involves itself in a cause or movement contrary to the creed of the individual--the Church, it is assumed, is therefore doing something it ought not to do.

Here, then, the great tragedy, The Church, because it is a human institution--because it rather enjoys being popular and acceptable and the object of interest, chooses to reflect this phenomenon called religion, rather than Christian Faith.

There is, after all, a great gap between the New Testament and what goes on inside the Church. Church people resent very much being reminded of that unkind fact. And yet it is true that the institution which bears the name of all men continues to be one of the most racially segregated and economically stratified institutions in the whole of society. The Church lost thousands of members and millions of dollars because it dared to suggest that racial justice is a legitimate concern and a great cause. And while it was being so humiliated by people who somehow still called themselves Christians, the photograph went out to all the world--of the governing board turning a Black worshipper away.

The Church now ranks fourth in the category of private building construction. And yet when a minister in this community told his people that poverty is a problem they must solve in the name of JesusChrist, he was called a Communist.

It's all a little confusing really. The gap can be called hypocrisy; but more to the point, I believe, it is merely a reflection of religion. The Church, far too often, chooses to be an institution of religion rather than the servant people of God. That's the problem of religion.

Now let's return to the New Testament. As I mentioned before, the author of the fourth Gospel placed the incident of the cleansing of the Temple at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. The other three Gospels place it at the end. It is apparent, then, that the Gospel of John, written perhaps seventy years after the fact, uses this event to preface the story of Jesus Christ. This sets the stage. This conflict-situation introduces what is to follow. The reader is warned, here, to look for the conflict as it keeps emerging throughout the story.

Historians have shed some very helpful light on what was going on that day at the Temple. (The following information from Wm. Barclay, The Mind of Jesus, Ch. 19, p. 187-192)

Every adult, male Jew had to pay an annual Temple tax of half a shekel. To put that into perspective, it amounted to almost two days' wages. The tax could be paid at certain times and places, but one month before the Passover it could be paid only at the Temple itself.

When he came to the Temple to pay his half-shekel, he found a series of courts. The first was the Court of the Gentiles into which men of all nations were welcome. It was here that booths were set up to collect the tax. But the tax could be paid only in a certain type of coin--one with no image. And so there were other booths at which m oney changers exchanged whatever currency the person had into the appropriate coins. For this service, the money changers were paid a fee. Part of the job, also, was to decide the legitimate value of the coins they were exchanging; and many an argument transpired over the silver scales--which were the tools of their trade.

Now in all probability a man who had come to Jerusalem to pay his Temple Tax would want to make some special thank offering while he was there. This appropriate act of worship was done by animal sacrifice. If he broughthis own lamb or pigeons--they had to be inspected for blemishes. The inspectors charged a fee. Of course, he could avoid all that and simply buy an animal which was already inspected, and which was conveniently for sale in this same court of the Gentiles.

It looked like a noisy carnival and sounds, for all the world, not unlike some Christmas Bazaars I've had the misfortune of attending. As usual, the people who got hurt byit all were the poor--the ones who couldn't afford a lamb to eat, let alone slaughter sacrificially. But worst of all--it was this--this display of economic exploitation that had been stamped on the minds of a whole people as religion. That's what religion is--that's what it can become.

Enter the conflict. Jesus didn't like what he saw, and in sheer righteous, virile indignation, cleansed the Court of the Gentiles by ejecting everyone involved. And if you like your religion soft and easy, if you think the phrase "peace and unity of the Church" means that no one is supposed to rock the boat; if you can picture Jesus with little children on his lap--but not with a whip in his hand--you re going to have trouble with the rest of what I have to say.

First--Christianity is not, and can never become--religion in the sense that I've used the word. Roger Smith said it well: "Christianity as a faith is always in conflict with Christianity as a religion, and there is an important--I should be inclined to say the most important--sense in which Christian faith includes within itself the permanent protest against its own religious forms and expressions." ("A Theological Perspective of the Secular", McCormick Quarterly, Nove. 1964)

Second, religion may seek consensus and take comfort in its acceptability and popularity, but Christianity may find itself called actually to provoke conflict. Nothing seems as clear as that--in light of our text this morning. And yet there is no doubt in my mind that this idea is anathema to a lot of churchmen today. Jesus didn't seek consensus. He didn't make compromises. He didn't use the word "tolerance" to disguise cowardice. He was an opponent of hypocricy, injustice and exploitation wherever he saw it, in a manner the church is loath to imitate. What do you think he would say, for instance, about the fact that there are houses in this city without running water--and that one of the bills our state legislature will consider has to do with upgrading and standardizing requirements for dog houses? I have an idea he'd call that one like he saw it and that there would be conflict--and that that is precisely what he wants us to do.

Third, religion--the general attitude of piety that afflicts our culture is a vague imitation--a poor replica of the real thing. Now to be sure, religion may be temporarily comfortable. It isn't going to cost an individual anything in terms of his time, his money, his prejudices and opinions. And precisely because it is so vague--precisely because it refuses to join the gut issues of the day--it really isn't worth much. Authentic Christian faith--complete commitment to Jesus Christ puts a man where the action is--and provides a sense of being in on the only really important thing that every happened in the history of mankind.

Finally, above all of this rises the spectre of a cross. When Jesus went to the very seat of the religious establishment and there opposed the specific forms that religion had taken he took the first long stride that would end on Calvary. When he cast his lot with thepoor; when he took his stand for integrity and compassion, and against hyprocricy and oppression he committed his life--even to death.

I believe the same kind of choice confronts the church today--and equally importantly--every individual who would call himself a Christian. The issue has not changed.

What will it be for us? Will we play games with an easy piety or will we allow Jesus Christ truly to be Lord? Will we be content with religion--or will we live out our commitment in Christian Faith? It is for each of us to answer. Amen